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Minister

Parks Branch

Clearwater River Provincial Park

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CLEARWATER RIVER PROVINCIAL

WILDERNESS PARK

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Background

The Province of Saskatchewan established the Clearwater River Provincial Wilderness Park in northwestern Saskatchewan in 1986 to protect the outstanding natural heritage, historical (human) heritage and outdoor recreational opportunities associated with the Clearwater River.

As its name implies, the Clearwater River is an unspoiled, clear-water river in a pristine wilderness setting of spectacular beauty. Because of the outstanding natural heritage and historical features, and the fine opportunities for wilderness canoeing and camping, the Saskatchewan section of the Clearwater River, from the outlet of Lloyd Lake to the Alberta border (187 km), has become an important addition to the Canadian Heritage Rivers System.

Canada's rivers together make up one of the most important elements of our national heritage. These rivers were an everyday part of the life of aboriginal people. They served as transportation and commerce networks from the time of the first explorers. The governments of Canada and many provinces and territories have agreed upon a cooperative conservation program, the Canadian Heritage Rivers System, to preserve these rivers for the public's benefit and enjoyment. The Clearwater is an outstanding river in the Heritage Rivers System.

Among the more important features which will be protected in the Provincial Wilderness Park are: geological formations, representing major time periods in the earth's geological development; rare and endangered species of birds, plants and animals; evidence, in the form of "pictographs" or rock paintings, of the region's pre-European Indian settlements; and the historic Methye Portage, over which passed many of Canada's best known explorers and fur traders.

Park Classification and Purpose

Saskatchewan has identified the Clearwater River Valley as an area of great importance to the people of Saskatchewan and Canada, and worthy of nomination as a candidate to be added to the Canadian Heritage Rivers System. Nomination in 1984 was based upon research studies carried out into the natural, historical and recreational values of the river. To qualify, a proposed heritage river must be large enough and must contain sufficient important resources.

In addition, the Province was required to prepare a management plan which would indicate the boundaries of the area to be specially managed, and set out the policies and actions to be followed to make sure that the river and its key resources were protected.

A Canadian Heritage River includes only the river itself and its immediate surroundings. Resource and land use management programs needed to protect the areas' resources, must be applied to a much larger area. The best way to provide the needed protection and management was to establish the Clearwater River Provincial Wilderness Park.

The boundaries of the 230,000 hectare (890 square mile) Wilderness Park are based on the need to minimize conflicts between protection of the many outstanding features and resources of the area and possible future industrial or other incompatible development.

For many years in Saskatchewan, the differences or unique features of Provincial Parks were not emphasized. One of the major provisions of the new Parks Act is to identify a classification of Provincial Parks for the purpose of creating a greater public awareness of the primary purpose of individual Parks and therefore a more appropriate understanding and use of the area. Four classes of Provincial Parks are now identified: Wilderness Parks; Natural Environment Parks; Recreation Parks and Historic Parks. As a Wilderness Park, Clearwater River will be protected, developed and used in manner distinctly different from the other three classes of Provincial Parks. It will provide only wilderness recreation opportunities, with little or no facility development. All private development is to be located outside the Park to preserve the natural environment of the Provincial Wilderness Park.

Location and Size

The Clearwater River is located in northwestern Saskatchewan, north of the community of La Loche, approximately 500 km from the City of Prince Albert. Provincial Highway #955 to Cluff Lake crosses the west part of the river near Warner Rapids, 57 km north of La Loche and 83 km upstream from the Alberta border. Another 53 km north the road passes to the west of Lloyd Lake from which the river flows southeast. Cluff Lake uranium mine is another 192 km north of Lloyd Lake.

While it is possible to reach the Clearwater River from the bridge at Warner Rapids, the river is remote and general access to the river's backcountry is limited to float-planes. This isolated wilderness character of the Clearwater River is one of its major appeals.

Rising in the northern coniferous forest region of the Precambrian Shield in northwestern Saskatchewan, the Clearwater River flows southeast for roughly half of its course through Saskatchewan, then turns sharply southwest for another 108 km to join the Athabasca River at Fort MacMurray, Alberta. Its waters eventually reach the MacKenzie River and the Arctic Ocean.

The park is approximately 890 mi^2 or 230,000 hectares.

Natural Heritage

From its headwaters in Broach Lake, just beyond Lloyd Lake 460 m above sea level, the Clearwater River drops about 150 m to its junction with the Athabasca River. As it flows downstream the river passes through two distinct geological areas, the character of the river changing to reflect the underlying changes in bedrock. The upper portion flows over the Precambrian Shield, through a number of bouldery rapids, over rocky ledges and waterfalls. Downstream below Warner Rapids the river valley deepens into a large glacial meltwater "spillway" which is the deepest glacial spillway in Saskatchewan. Spring-fed streams have produced dissected topography and

active slumping of a scale not found elsewhere in northern Saskatchewan. As it passes through the Interior Plains, the river channel is characterized by islands and sand bars. High valley walls are seen at the west end of the Park where the river flows into Alberta.

The region surrounding the Clearwater River contains a diversity of natural features, some unique and many providing excellent examples of particular landforms. Although the most spectacular visual feature of the Park is the broad, deep glacial spillway, a number of smaller features are to be noted. These include the outcrops of Devonian dolomites; a fault-induced waterfall; a virtually abandoned waterfall course exposing highly polished bedrock and large (1.5 m wide, 2 m deep) cylindrical potholes; a resistant ledge in Contract Rapids that vividly marks the interface between the Precambrian Shield and the overlying, sedimentary bedrock. Cretaceous bedrock outcrops also occur in the vicinity, including small amounts of lignite coal. Other interesting landform features relate to other glacial erosion and deposition processes and ongoing fluvial and geomorphological processes.

Biological processes reflect the role of fire in the watershed and also reflect the diverse landform and ongoing changes to it. Micro-climates created by the large valley protect stands of large white spruce and balsam fir at the northern extension of their range and south facing valley walls maintain a unique northern grassland.

A number of rare plant species are known to occur within the Park and more are suspected to occur. Further botanical studies are expected to reveal an intermixture to arctic-subarctic species with those from more southerly habitats.

Information on the presence of rare or endangered wildlife is also limited. Both bald eagles and osprey breed in the area and can be seen along the River. White pelicans, a threatened species, nest in the area and the Park is within the breeding range of the great gray owl. Caspian terns are thought to occur infrequently. Wolverine, increasingly rare in Canada, are found in low numbers and Woodland Caribou have also been seen.

Human Heritage

Prehistoric archaeological information for the Clearwater River area is preliminary and scanty at best. The presence of aboriginal people is known from a cursory search for prehistoric sites on Portage La Loche (Methye Portage) with artifacts dating 200 years ago. The excavation of these findings indicates that further investigation would present archaeological evidence to extend the record of habitation to at least 5000 years ago. Historic evidence indicates that during the prehistoric period Athapaskan-speaking Beaver Indians occupied the Clearwater River area and that during the late prehistoric period the Cree may have displaced this tribe, while an influx of the Chipewyan occurred much later.

Three pictograph sites have been discovered on the upper Clearwater River between Lloyd and Careen Lakes. These paintings use reddish pigment (ochre) symbols or shapes on vertical rock surfaces, a style similar to other Shield rock art, and are the farthest north and west documented sites in Saskatchewan.

Along with fur trade goods and European contact followed disease. Two outbreaks of smallpox in 1781 and 1838 had devastating effects on Saskatchewan Indians, especially the Cree. The decrease in the Cree population of the area allowed for immigration of Athapaskan-speaking Chipewyan from their traditional ranges farther north, enticed by the traders to frequent the boreal forest and ultimately to provide more furs to the fur trade industry. By the end of the eighteenth century Chipewyans occupied the Clearwater River area and southward to Cold Lake. Contact with the European culture and dependency on the trading posts caused major changes in the demography, religion, livelihood and culture of the aboriginal Indian nations.

The portage across the height of land between the Clearwater River and Lac La Loche is one of the most significant portages of fur trading history. Virtually every fur trader, explorer, surveyor, and scientist of the 100 years' active use of this trail passed this way to reach the Athabasca District. Some of the better known names are Peter Pond, Alexander MacKenzie, John Franklin, Thompson Frobisher, Peter Fidler, David Thompson, George Simpson and John Macoun.

In 1936 the Historic Sites and Monuments Board of Canada commemorated the portage by erecting a plaque on which the following was inscribed:

Methye Portage

The earliest trade route between eastward and northward flowing waters followed the Clearwater River and the Methye Portage. Discovered by Peter Pond in 1778 and used continuously for more than a century by fur-traders and explorers, including Sir Alexander MacKenzie, Sir John Franklin, and Sir George Simpson.

This area at the southern terminus of the portage trail was dedicated by the Historic Sites and Monuments Board of Canada as a Historic Site on August 17, 1974.

The river environment, with the exception of the highway crossing, is virtually unchanged since prehistoric times.

Outdoor Recreation

Recreational activities in the Park mainly include sport fishing, wilderness canoeing and camping.

Sport fishing has been, for some time, the principal recreational pursuit. Prior to the completion of the Cluff Lake road (Highway #955) access was by floatplane to lakes near the outfitters' camps. Road access has added the Clearwater River crossing and several lakes in the vicinity of Broach Lake to the number of areas where angling occurs and is increasing. Angling is largely a summer activity with peak use of outfitter facilities occurring in June and September.

Virtually all of the Clearwater River within the Wilderness Park is capable of providing quality water travel by canoe, with the lower reaches (Warner Rapids to Methye Portage) providing an exceptionally high-quality whitewater canoeing or kayaking experience.

The use of the Clearwater River as a recreational whitewater canoe route essentially began after 1972, when it was surveyed for suitability by both Federal and Provincial agencies. The Province published a descriptive booklet on the section from Warner Rapids (road access) to Fort MacMurray, Alberta (Canoe Route 40); a federal booklet covers the full trip beginning at Lloyd Lake outlet (fly-in).

Sites for primitive camping are numerous on most sections especially near rapids and falls. Angling, photography, wildlife and scenic viewing, nature and historical appreciation, and some swimming are peripheral activities of wilderness canoeists.

A very small number of people canoe from La Loche to hike the portage trail and view the Clearwater Valley, although this is also reportedly increasing. Togography and geologic formations providing locations for trails of various lengths are diverse, with a concentration of such features occurring near the lower reach. Requirements for a hiking trail network, such as water, firewood and campsite locations, are in generous supply.

Numerous rapids provide sites for walleye and arctic grayling foraging while shoreline habitats formed by bays and inlets harbour northern pike. Sport fishing capability of the river is good, with some sites offering extremely good fishing.

The Clearwater River has long been very important to residents of the area. Its importance to the spiritual, cultural, traditional and economic aspects of Treaty and non-treaty native community life is a major part of what makes the Clearwater so special as a Heritage River. Local residents will have a special role to play in the development, management and operation of the Wilderness Park. A number of important traditions and activities by local residents will continue, including trapping, domestic hunting and use of cabins. As recreational use of the Clearwater River increases, local residents should experience economic and employment benefits.

In summary, the Clearwater River Wilderness Park possesses a combination of recreational opportunities and related natural values which together provide a capability for an outstanding recreational experience.

The features which give provincial significance to the Wilderness Park are distributed along the length of the river. The historical focus is on the lower reach of the Park area particularly at and along Methye Portage. Natural heritage features are particularly outstanding in the lower reaches of the river below Warner Rapids, while recreational value is most applicable from Lloyd Lake downstream.

Units of the Park

The Clearwater River has gradually changed from a "working" river used by native people and fur traders to a river where recreation uses are becoming more common. As a result, the demands placed upon the river have changed and are expected to increase.

To conserve and protect the resources of the Wilderness Park, a set of land or resource use policies has been adopted to help ensure that the values and opportunities of the Clearwater River Provincial Park are protected and conserved for future generations.

1. Four distinct units of the Park are noteworthy: The river corridor wilderness unit which provides the greatest possible protection for the heritage and recreational values of the Clearwater Canadian Heritage River while providing opportunities for high quality recreational enjoyment of these special resources;

2. An upland river buffer unit which protects important heritage values in the Park by separating, where possible, wilderness areas from areas of possible future industrial activity of their incompatible land uses and without harming traditional activities;

3. A special heritage unit which provides special protection for very important natural and cultural heritage resources, including Methye Portage; and

4. A river service unit which provides access to and across the Park adjacent to Provincial Highway #955.

Benefits of the Provincial Park

A Canadian Heritage River includes only the river itself and its immediate surroundings. Establishment of the 230,000 hectare (890 square-mile) Provincial Park will enable resource and land use management policies, guidelines and regulations to be applied over a much broader area. The Park will protect all those heritage and recreational resources that led to the acceptance of the Clearwater River as a Canadian Heritage River.

The Park will ensure that the river and surrounding areas will be managed in a way that:

* its important resources are protected and conserved for future generations;

* sensitive and fragile natural and human heritage values are protected from disturbance by recreational and non-recreational river uses;

* heritage values which contribute to the essential character of the river are adequately conserved, and/or protected and administered within a defined boundary, permitting special management policies and functions; and

* a variety of groups, whose use of the river corridor does not irreparably harm heritage values or conflict with the activities of one another, are permitted to use the river and surrounding areas.

The Wilderness Park's greatest recreational value lies in the opportunity it provides visitors to experience an extended wilderness canoe and camping trip through an area of unspoiled and outstanding natural beauty in Saskatchewan. Representing virtually every type of river condition, ranging from challenging whitewater rapids, narrow channels and gorges, to broad meandering sections with sandbars and islands, the remote and wild Clearwater River provides an excellent opportunity for experienced whitewater adventurers to test their skills. In addition to the exhilaration of tackling the Clearwater River itself, wilderness canoeists will also find great potential for wildlife photography, fishing, hiking, observing nature and appreciating Canada's history and prehistory. Hiking the 19 km Methye Portage from Lac La Loche to the Clearwater will take visitors back in time to the exploration and fur trade era.

Available Facilities

Due to its undeveloped state and classification as a Wilderness Park, its large distance from major population centers, and its limited accessibility, Clearwater River Provincial Park offers very little in the way of facilities and services. Roadside camping is provided at the 20 site campground near the bridge at Warner Rapids where Highway #955 (Semchuk Trail) crosses the Park.

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